

MANASSEH OF ILYA (1767-1831): DIVINE AND SECULAR KNOWLEDGE OR THE TWO DIMENSIONS OF TORAH

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A major topic in the writings of Manasseh of Ilya is that of knowledge, to which he devoted at least forty chapters in both parts of *'Alpè Menaššeh*.¹ He classifies knowledge in a variety of ways, from a variety of points of view, the final aim of which is to disseminate among his coreligionists an awareness of the new knowledge that has been accumulating in the world, and the necessity of acquiring it for the sake of making life easier, safer, and richer.

He first classifies knowledge according to its two sources, the senses and reason. He describes knowledge solely derived from the senses as particular and perforce limited in scope. Indeed, were the senses the only source of knowledge, man could never have raised himself above the animal stage. The senses are essential as "tools" of reason, but it is reason that transforms the particular data obtained through the senses into universals and thus organizes man's world. As for the function of reason, Manasseh emphasizes above all its subsumptive quality, i.e., its striving for ever more embracing concepts, and considers its progress in terms of expanding generalizations.²

Reflecting the prevalent view among scholars of the 17th and 18th centuries, Manasseh considered mathematics the highest expression of rational knowledge. "All its ways," he wrote, "are demonstrative, following only one method, which certainly is the clear truth."³ On the other hand, he was critical of those who sought mathematical certainty in areas which do not yield to its methods, and who were of the opinion that, "since there

1. *Alpè Menaššeh* (henceforth *AM*) (Wilno, 1822), chaps. 24-57; *Alpè Menaššeh*, II. (Wilno, 1904), chaps. 1, 2, 16, 17, 18.

2. *AM*, chaps. 24, 49, 73, 175; II, ch. 2.

3. *AM*, II, chaps. 2, 16, 17, pp. 15, 27, 29, and more.

was no clear rational knowledge outside of mathematics . . . human behavior must perforce be based on mere fantasy and conjecture." Such a view, he writes, "confuses and destroys the orderly state of the world" (ch. 21, p. 31).

Of a lower order and only indirectly derived from either source are two additional kinds of knowledge which Manasseh groups under the collective title of *mequbbâlôt*.⁴ He calls the first narrative knowledge⁵ and the second—imitative knowledge.⁶ He defines the first as knowledge one arrives at

neither by the senses, nor by reason, but by hearing about it from a friend or friends . . . Although the original transmitter perforce obtained that knowledge either by his senses or by his reason, there exists in this kind of knowledge, in addition to the fear of error, also the fear of falsehood, i.e., lest for some anticipated gain /the transmitter/ might have lied. The longer the chain of transmitters, the greater the fear of both error and falsehood (ch. 25, p. 10a).

Regrettably Manasseh did not elaborate, nor did he give any example of this kind of knowledge. It stands to reason that he was referring to historical knowledge, and one wonders whether he would also include in it the Biblical narrative (See Barzilay, 1974, pp. 173-175).

Manasseh defines "imitative" knowledge as "a kind of narrative knowledge, but inferior to it (ch. 28, p. 10b). One does not obtain it by transmission, but by observing the behavior of one's fellow men and imitating that behavior. Critically he comments, however, that what may be good for some people and in accordance with their interest and temperament must not necessarily be so for other people. He therefore thinks that this sort of knowledge should not be considered knowledge at all. Regrettably, however, it constitutes the basis for the behavior and opinions of most people, and whoever does not conform to it is considered an ignoramus and a fool.⁷

There also are other classifications of knowledge or "wisdom" in the writings of Manasseh. According to one, it is divided into theoretical and practical,⁸ and according to another, into human and divine.⁹ While the

4. Transmitted Knowledge.

5. *sippûrî*, *AM*, ch. 25, p. 10.

6. *mequbbâlôt*, *AM*, ch. 28, pp. 10-11.

7. *AM*, ch. 28, p. 10b; *AM*, II, ch. 18, pp. 29-30.

8. *lyyûnîl umāsi*: *AM*, chaps 37, 38, 39, p. 13b.

9. *hoqmôt 'enōšiyvôt vehoqmat hattōrah min haššāma'im*. *AM*, chaps. 78 (p. 27b), 173 (pp. 68-69).

first represents a secular and general point of view, the second represents a religious and specifically Jewish point of view, separating mundane and transcendental knowledge. Neither of these classifications is original, and both are frequently encountered in the writings of the Berlin *maskilim*.

Manasseh defines theoretical knowledge as constituting a goal in itself. He includes in it experiences of both an aesthetic and an intellectual nature. On the other hand, he defines practical knowledge as the mastery of a trade or a business for the purpose of gaining a livelihood. Such knowledge serves no purpose in itself, but is a mere preparation for the attainment of the true and real goal, the actualization of reason.¹⁰

Of greater importance and consequence in Manasseh's thought is his division of knowledge into "human" and "divine." Though he, no doubt, was indebted for this classification to Wessely's *Words of Peace and Truth* (1782), in which the poet-laureate of the Berlin Haskalah drew a demarcation line between the *Teaching of God* and the *Teaching of Man*,¹¹ urging his coreligionists to embrace both, Manasseh worked out this division in his own original way, thereby avoiding some of the pitfalls of Wessely's formulation, which could have been disastrous for him in the Lithuanian milieu of the time.

What is interesting in this division of knowledge into human and divine is the relationship Manasseh seeks to establish between the two, expressing some original thoughts about the possible role of Judaism in the modern world and its unique function in a culture of a predominantly scientific character. On the one hand he separates the two, but on the other hand, he desires to bring them into close cooperation with each other, which in his view is essential for the good of mankind as a whole. He extols the divine teachings of the Torah as superior by far to secular learning, comparing the Torah to the soul which acts and leads, and human learning to the body which is led and acted upon.¹² He further asserts that the divine Torah prepares man for eternal life, whereas secular knowledge only improves his temporal, mundane lot. On the other hand, he subjugates the Torah to secular knowledge and assigns to it a role that is merely preparatory. Before further clarifying this apparent dualism, we must briefly describe Manasseh's view of *human* knowledge.

10. *AM*, chaps. 37-39, p. 13b. This division of knowledge is frequently referred to in the writings of Yiṣḥaq Satanow (1732-1805), one of the most able and prolific writers of the Berlin Haskalah. Cf. his *Mišlê 'Asaf*, I (1789, ch. 28); *Hölêk tāmim* (1795, ch. 4); *Dihrê Rihût* (1800, p. 13). As for the place and year of the publication of *Dihrê Rihût*, see Klausner (1930, p. 149, n. 4).

11. *Tōrat Haššēm vetōrat ha'ādām*.

12. *AM*, chaps. 78, 181 (p. 76), *AM*, II, ch. 16, pp. 25-28.

He divides it into three categories: 1) mathematical-technological,¹³ 2) natural,¹⁴ and 3) divine-volitional.¹⁵ He is quite clear and convincing about the first two, but his formulation of the third one—though not the idea itself—is somewhat hazy. He explains the combined title of the first category as follows:

Limmūdiyyôt /mathematics/ deals with . . . arithmetic and geometry. It is also called *melākūtīl* / technological/, because through it tools for all kinds of crafts are produced.¹⁶

Manasseh, no doubt, was aware that the role of mathematics was by far greater than its functional use in technology; however, in line with the utilitarian approach of the 18th century, he put the greatest stress on its practical application.

Clearly defined and elaborated at great length is the second category, that of natural knowledge. It is a major theme in his writings, to which he returns again and again. Thus, in the opening chapter of *'Alpê Menaššeh*, II, he describes that category as follows:

The Creator, blessed be He, prepared inside the earth and upon its surface . . . several kinds of soil, sand and clay, various metals and many kinds of stones, from the precious to the plain, which are used for the construction of walls. They are abundant and unclaimed, only awaiting to be extracted by a knowledge of their properties. Among the vegetable species, there also are some that grow by themselves and may be picked up by anyone. It is only necessary to know how to mix and prepare them, so that they may be used for both food and medicine. This is also true with respect to some seeds which are sown for food . . . From some of them, and by only a small investment, great benefits may be derived . . . It is thus obvious that man must direct his main effort toward the acquisition of a great amount of necessary knowledge, a task which requires much thought and diligence.¹⁷

In another passage, he is even more specific, stressing both the abundance of nature and the importance of mathematics and natural science for its exploitation for the benefit of man.¹⁸

Most interesting are Manasseh's views on the third category of knowledge, which, strangely enough, he termed both "divine" and "volitional."

13. *limmūdiyyōth-melākūtīl*.

14. *ṭbīyyī*.

15. *'elōhī-resūmtyī*.

16. *A.M.*, II, ch. 16, p. 26.

17. *A.M.*, II, ch. 1, p. 14.

18. *Ibid.*, ch. 16, pp. 26-27.

He offers two explanations for the term "divine": the first, because this category deals with man, whose composition of body and soul is divine; the second, because in Hebrew the term "*elôhi*" (divine) connotes leadership and rule, qualities again associated with man (ch. 79). The term "volitional" (*resôniyyî*), he further points out, also indicates that this category deals with men, each one of whom has a will of his own, with his own proclivities and ambitions, needs and desires, and it requires great wisdom and strength to reconcile them, and to lead and govern them.¹⁹

The somewhat awkward description of this category notwithstanding, Manasseh's conception of it and the connection he seeks to establish between it and the other categories is quite obvious. Following his praises for mathematics and natural sciences, he poses the question how best to apply them for the improvement of man's lot in the world. However, before answering it, he feels obligated to justify his preoccupation with this problem in the first place. If man's supreme goal has been declared to be the concern with the fate of his soul²⁰—why bother at all with the transient and trivial affairs of the body? In reply, Manasseh draws a parallel between the relationship of God and the universe, on the one hand, and between the soul and the body, on the other hand. Just as God, the soul of the universe, "wishes" the universal body to function properly, so too does the human soul desire proper function from "its" body.²¹ Indeed, the connection between body and soul being an integral one, the contemplative task of the soul, for the sake of attaining its higher goal, cannot be achieved unless the well-being of the body is first assured. In short, the mundane happiness of man is a prerequisite for the achievement of his higher, spiritual happiness.²² Having thus asserted his alleged loyalty to the higher transcendental ideal, Manasseh now feels free to leave that subject, and, returning to mundane affairs, he offers his views on the improvement of society. As seen, he was convinced that the Creator amply provided nature with "raw materials" to satisfy all of man's needs and pleasures. Moreover, he also was convinced that the developments in mathematics, the sciences, and technology had reached a level unprecedented in the history of man. "It is quite possible," he wrote, "that all necessary knowledge had already been attained." However, it is the low moral state of man that prevents that knowledge from becoming universally diffused and turned into a tool for the general good. The disagreements and contentions among people, stem-

19. *Ibid.*, ch. 82, pp. 28-29; II, ch. 16, pp. 26-27.

20. *AM*, ch. 73, p. 24a; *AM* II, ch. 26, pp. 36-37.

21. *Samma dehayyè*, in Raisin (1923, p. 206). See also *AM*, ch. 136, p. 53.

22. *AM*, ch. 136, p. 53b; *AM*, II ch. 16, p. 26, ch. 26, p. 37; Manasseh (1823, p. 3b).

ming from their opposite views and desires, block cooperation and impede progress. Knowledge already accumulated cannot become functional unless men would first learn to reconcile their differences and to become socially aware and responsive. Manasseh thus believes that the trouble of humanity lies primarily in the gap between its intellectual and ethical developments and that that gap would not close before greater cooperation and humanitarianism would prevail in the world. For the attainment of this goal, however, he thinks that there is no better instrument than the Torah, all of whose commandments prepare man for the adoption of the great principle of Hillel: "What is hateful unto thee, you should not do unto your friend."²³

All the positive and negative commandments, the non-rational (auditory)²⁴ and the rational, as well as the Biblical narrations . . . improve men's morals and ensure harmony among them, thus preparing them in no small measure to reach the heights of knowledge in mathematics and natural science, through which all the needs of men can be satisfied.²⁵

In view of the above, the essence of the third category of knowledge has finally been elucidated and defined. Its subject is none other than the Torah, conceived of as the reconciler of differences, the harmonizer of opposing tendencies, and the moral guide of man. In the final stage of his speculation, Manasseh thus merges the two divisions of knowledge, the human and the divine, harnessing them both to the supreme task of improving society and man's earthly lot.

By interpreting science in utilitarian-functional terms alone and Torah in ethical-educational terms alone, steering clear of the mutually exclusive philosophies underlying these two so widely-separate cultural domains, Manasseh not only legalized the pursuit of secular studies by Jews, but placed those studies in one framework with Torah. Furthermore, within that framework he placed Torah in a rather subservient position to science and mathematics, defining its role as that of the moral educator of man for the sake of his material advancement by the aid of scientific knowledge. It is thus noteworthy that while Manasseh was critical of the medieval Jewish thinkers for subjecting the Torah to philosophy,²⁶ he himself seems to have done much the same, though, of course, in the framework of modern sci-

23. T. B. Shab. 31a.

24. שמעיה

25. *AM*, II, ch. 16, 27; see also *AM*, ch. 181, p. 76b and more.

26. Manasseh (1807, p. 10).

ence. No doubt aware of this, he offers two explanations to reassert the superiority of Torah over secular knowledge. He writes:

Although the Torah is only a preparation for the essential knowledge²⁷ of natural science and mathematics, it is deeper, wider and more embracing than (the expanse) of the earth. In opposition to science, which deals with fixed and constant things, the Torah deals with man and his constantly changing views, which are the result of the changing times and conditions.

Besides, there actually are two aspects of Torah, one external, the other internal. It is only the first that has been put at the service of mundane goals, to help improve man's lot on earth; the latter, however, remains reserved for the much superior task of preparing the soul for its eternal bliss.²⁸

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27. "קריית יוסף"

28. *AM*, II ch. 16, pp. 27-28; ch. 32, pp. 44-45. Regarding Manasseh's concept of Torah as the reconciler among men, see Ben Maimon (1960 II, ch. 40).